

POOLS PARADISE

TALES FROM THE SWIMMING LIFE By Mark Schoofs

Joggers have it easy. All they have to do is put on their shoes and go. But swimmers, we've got to work for our workouts. Half the adventure is getting there. Every day I pedal up to Midtown, slaloming through traffic, to take the plunge at the 47th Street YMCA. And New York is cake. Swimming in exotic places is a real challenge. But it's worth it. Swimming lets you, uh, immerse yourself in a local culture. It's a unique way to get to know a new city.

MOSCOW, PART I: It's not even dawn and I'm trudging over icy sidewalks to the subway, en route to the world's largest outdoor swimming pool. Yes, I'm going swimming outdoors, in Moscow, with the temperature below freezing. Told you we were tougher than joggers.

I check my subway map carefully. The letters are Cyrillic, of course, so I "read" these hieroglyphs through primitive shape recognition. We come to my stop, and in the predawn half-light I emerge into a territory that does not correspond at all to the map.

I approach a newspaper vendor, a stout babushka with thick fingers and a bulbous nose. I smile and ask, *Vy govorite po angliiskii?*, do you speak English? *Nyet*, she giggles. *Français?* *Nyet*. *Deutsch?* *Nyet*. We're both laughing as I try my last language: *Español?* *Nyet*. Resorting to sign language, I display my map and point to where I think I am. She giggles some more, and calls over a colleague from another stand. They turn the map this way and that, run their fingers along various subway routes, and keep giggling. Finally they point to where we are—which, of course, is miles from where I want to be.

I trudge back down into the subway, triple-check my hieroglyphs, and get out at what I am sure is the right stop. But, again, the landscape doesn't match the map! Where the pool should be stands a mammoth building under construction.

I have a work appointment, so I give up on trying to swim. But later I find out what happened to the pool:

After Napoleon's invasion was repelled, the czars thanked God by erecting the most glorious Orthodox temple ever. Adorned with gold and precious gems, it took 45 years to build. It was, in the words of masterful Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, Moscow's Notre Dame.

Fast-forward to the rise of Stalin. He decided to build a palace of people's deputies taller than the Empire State Building, topped by a statue of Lenin taller than the Statue of Liberty. And just so people would have no doubt that Communism had triumphed over religion, he chose to build it on the site of the temple. He looted the church, razed it, and dug the foundation pit, only to be thwarted by another invasion. This time it was the Nazis. More than 20 million Soviet citizens died, and so, too, did the will and money to fulfill Stalin's architectural megalomania.

The pit remained, a scar on the face of Moscow, until Khrushchev. He converted it into a swimming pool, where bearlike Russians can show their disdain for winter.

Though Communism fell, Moscow remained the undisputed hub of the nation. Since most of the country's wealth flows through the city at some point, the new mayor has been able to do what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan can only dream about: indulge his yen for architectural history on a grand scale. The scaffold-shrouded building I saw is the reconstructed Orthodox temple.

But it won't be exactly like it was before. Perhaps symbolizing the new Russia, the new temple will have an underground parking garage.

BERLIN: True to national stereotype, the Ger-

The pool is in one of the few buildings that survived the Allied bombing, an ornate red brick edifice with Rubensian ceiling murals. In the pool are about 50 people, mostly couples in their thirties and forties, a few gay, several with children. As I watch them, I recall a *New York Times* story about the many American high school students who are refusing to shower at

the ideal body if they never see real bodies.

The *Times* gave another reason for Gen-X shyness: gay liberation has made students aware that, heaven forfend, someone might be desiring them. But if they were accustomed to being naked with men and women, young and old, gay and straight and in-between, being admired wouldn't have the mixture of fear and frisson that makes it so uncomfortable. They might even learn that nudity is not, per se, sexy. Of course, it's impossible to imagine public pools in any American city (except maybe San Francisco) offering skinny-dipping days. But here in Germany, even the saunas are coed: Women and men sit naked in the steam room together, getting relaxed physically and, I think, psychologically.

BUDAPEST: If Berlin is the city of skinny-dipping, Budapest is the metropolis of peculiar bathing attire. The city boasts many Turkish-style baths—grand communal spas, several dating back centuries. Men and women bathe separately, and the men wear the silliest article of clothing ever, a little white loincloth with no back. Like a mini apron, a white rectangle covers the genitals; strings tied behind one's back hold it in place. It's like a fig leaf, except it doesn't hide anything. Step into the luxurious warm mineral baths, and the breechcloth floats, exposing all. Get out of the bath and the thin cloth is more revealing than wet underwear.

The most luxurious bathhouse is at the Hotel Gellert. Built in the 19th century, it's all ornate pillars and shimmering mosaics, like a set from Hollywood's age of epics. Think Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. The swimming pool, located between the men's and women's baths, is illuminated by skylights and decorated with a fountain. But when I first visited, just after the fall of Communism, my attention quickly strayed to the bathing suits. I particularly remember an algae-green one-piece made from what looked like curtain cloth; the wearer, with dusky lipstick, was also sporting black bug-eye sunglasses. The ensemble wasn't sexy. What it did have was a retro-ugly-chic feel, like the kind of thing Elizabeth Taylor might have worn off-set during one of her less-than-svelte periods to avoid autograph hounds.

Out in the city, the street clothes also seemed frozen in time just before the late-'60s tie-dye revolution. Communism, which only allowed a few state-owned clothing companies, eschewed the Paris-London-Milan couture circuit. At the height of the ripped-up, washed-out Levi's look, the Soviets announced a plan to create superior blue jeans—ones that did *not* fade.

That single decision explains why Communism failed. It had no style.

MOSCOW, PART II: I've found another pool, one that hasn't been lost to history. I'm in the locker room, clad only in my Speedo, peering out a small window at, oh my God, a scene from Admiral Perry's trip to the North Pole. The pool deck looks like a glacier, icicles hang off the starting blocks, the bleachers appear to be a mammoth snowdrift. True, the pool itself is steaming, but how am I going to get there? Even though I'm still inside, I feel my body begin to shiver, and I wonder whether my feet will stick to the ice that covers the deck.

And then I notice the single most ingenious swimming-pool feature ever: a canal filled with heated water leading from the locker room to the pool. I swim out, the warm water lapping at the canal's icy walls, and triumphantly begin another workout.



Buda's delight, bathing at the Hotel Gellert

mans have organized their swimming pools. A pamphlet you can pick up at any pool lists all the city's public *Schwimmbäder*, their hours of operation, even their temperatures. There are also notations for special activities: seniors only, for example, or *Nacktbaden*. Whoa, does that mean what I think? I check my pocket dictionary, and, sure enough, it means "naked bathing." Yippee! Skinny-dipping!

school, even after sports, because they don't want to be naked in front of their peers. One explanation has them intimidated by advertising, with its images of perfect bodies that mere mortals can almost never match. Here—amidst the mixture of muscle and fat, tautness and sags, and, yes, penises and breasts of all sizes and shapes—I wonder how our high school students will ever escape the tyranny of

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